

How to “pitch” your legal services So that clients will “catch”

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Congratulations! Thanks to a lot of hard work, you’ve finally nailed down the opportunity to “pitch” your legal services to a targeted, qualified client. Obviously, you want to make the most of this hard-won opportunity.

“Solid presentation skills are essential to securing new business,” said Brigid O’Connor, MBA. “Whether you are delivering the pitch or helping prepare for it, you know that prospect meetings are both a vital marketing tool and a potential obstacle to success.”

O’Connor is founder of At Ease, LLC (www.at-easelc.com), where she uses speaking and training engagements to help people present with efficiency and purpose. She delivered these remarks on effective new business presentations at the monthly educational meeting of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association (www.legalmarketing.org/rockymountain), held Jan. 8 at the Marriott City Center in downtown Denver.

According to O’Connor, successful pitches depend on two characteristics – likability and preparation.

Likability

Research demonstrates that when selecting a service provider – such as an attorney or law firm -- decision-makers are more receptive to those they like. “At a certain level of achievement, expertise is assumed,” said O’Connor, “and decisions are made on the basis of an existing or anticipated relationship.

Rapport (the ability to build relationships on the fly and over time) plays a role in your likability. This is especially true in the area of professional services – where the “product” you are selling cannot be distinguished from you as a person.

“The professional services offered by a lawyer are much more difficult to ‘test drive’ than a physical product like a hair-dryer,” said O’Connor. “As a result, potential clients are

looking for even the smallest clues to use in their decision-making. They find these clues in seemingly silly places -- handshakes, eye contact and initial small talk.”

For those who do not find it easy to build rapport, tools like matching and mirroring can play a role. “You don’t want to go overboard, however,” said O’Connor. “Take your cues from the other person’s facial expression, subject matter, tone, pace, formality and energy level in an ongoing attempt to connect during the prospect meeting – but always be authentic and sincere.”

Nascent rapport can be damaged in numerous ways, including interruptions, disrespect and not listening.

“As wordsmiths, many lawyers tend to leap ahead to craft their next comments when they should be listening to the prospect,” said O’Connor. “Frankly, it is something that we all do. Try to remember that the spotlight should be shining on the client, not you.

“The business pitch isn’t for reeling off a list of the firm’s features and benefits – hogging the time allotted,” said O’Connor. “While it seems somewhat counterintuitive, the amount of time you talk versus the amount of time you listen during a client pitch is inversely related to your ability to secure new business.”

Likability is also a product of how you look and sound as you **deliver** your message. “Dress appropriately, of course, then square up your posture and maintain an open facial expression,” said O’Connor. “Maintain eye contact and eliminate anything that interferes from your message, like distracting accessories or incompetent use of audiovisuals or scripts.” Although some of these tips can seem simplistic, the goal is to remove any “noise” from a channel where your message should be paramount.

How you sound also factors into your credibility. Enunciate clearly and make sure that your pace, tone and emotional expression are appropriate.

“When people form an impression of you via the telephone,” said O’Connor, “87 percent of that impression is based on the tone of your voice. Before making or receiving a phone call with a prospective client, take a moment to collect yourself and focus. Because you are ‘backfilling’ for a ton of missing visual clues, your tone of voice carries a disproportionate amount of weight on the phone.”

Resilience is another component of likability. Resilience is the ability to flex and flow with anything you encounter during a pitch. “While PowerPoints and scripts can help keep people on track,” said O’Connor, “they can also serve as straight-jackets when you detect that a mid-course correction is needed during the pitch.

“The skilled presenter is constantly attuned to listeners’ reactions and makes appropriate mid-course corrections,” said O’Connor, “such as shortening the pitch, increasing the energy level, or reiterating or simplifying complex concepts.”

The final element of likability is **follow-up** – promptly via a hand-written personal note to each person in the meeting and over time via a structured contact system. “Even if you don’t get the business you are pitching,” said O’Connor, “continue to build the relationship by sending articles, alerts, branded documents and holiday greetings.”

Preparation

Decision-makers are also more receptive to a presentation that is well-researched and customized to their unique needs and wants. To craft an effective pitch, you need to unearth and use intelligence about your audience, your competition and yourself.

First of all, **research** the prospective client. Find out who will attend the presentation and conduct an Internet search to find out more about them. Your firm’s resource department/librarian can be a valuable partner in this effort. In addition, find out if someone at your own firm or in your network can provide more background.

“Research the prospect’s business and industry,” said O’Connor. “Determine its strengths and weaknesses so that you can present a plan to enhance the former and alleviate the latter.” It is also important to research your competition – other law firms the prospect is using or has used in the past, as well as other law firms currently vying for the same business.

Finally, research your own practice, brand and unique selling points – and be ready to use these in your presentation. “Spell out how what you offer exactly matches what the prospect needs and wants,” said O’Connor. “Clearly differentiate yourself from the other lawyers or law firms that might be pitching for this same business. If you can’t differentiate yourself, then the decision will be based solely on likability.”

When your research is complete, focus on the actual **content** to be presented. “It is important to craft your pitch in advance, and include no more than three main points,” said O’Connor. “A pitch is about more than information-sharing; it is about persuading the client to work with your firm. The points you make should build a case that demonstrates how your firm can meet the client’s needs and wants.”

Content and word choice in a presentation should be vivid, powerful, concise and concrete -- not bland, weak, rambling and abstract. Make good use of statistics, rhetorical questions, analogies, case studies, testimonials, humor and stories, which are all tested ways of maintaining interest and improving memorability. Use these tools to start strong, end strong and vary the flow of your presentation every five minutes or so.

In addition, presenters should anticipate all of the questions a prospect might ask – including negative questions -- and prepare answers in advance.

Practice is an essential part of preparing for a successful presentation. “Only during a dry run can you (or your helpful colleagues) detect the weaknesses in the pitch,” said

O'Connor. Are the main points discernable? Do you go beyond informing and also persuade? Is the content compelling and vivid? Is it clear that you want the business? Is it convincing that you are the best candidate?

"I've heard of the phenomenon in law firms where the attorneys return from a pitch convinced that it was a success," said O'Connor, "only to learn otherwise when they don't get the business. This could happen because we are programmed to remember things that are congruent with success.

"Even if you delivered your pitch flawlessly," said O'Connor, "that does not mean it contained anything the prospective client wanted to hear. Don't fall victim to this disconnect. Do substantive advance research. Think through your likability, rapport, delivery and resilience. Include a clear, sincere 'ask.'"